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Students as ‘Animal Laborans’? Tracing Student Politics in a Marketised Higher Education Setting

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Abstract

This article examines the widespread policy discourses that have constructed the notion of student as consumer in English higher education, and it questions the implications of such fabrications on students’ political engagement. In particular, it explores the extent to which students have been forced into a position of an ‘animal laboran’ whose primary function is to focus on immediate necessities in highly pressurised university environments. By drawing on Arendt, the article will first consider the shift towards representative practices in student politics, characterised by professionalisation of students’ unions. Second, the article will draw on Foucault to investigate the ways in which more personalised forms of students’ political participation related to private interest and single-issue campaigns can emerge in neoliberalised universities and society more broadly.

Keywords

Arendt, Foucault, marketisation of higher education, student politics, students as consumers

Introduction

Recent scholarly, policy and public discourses indicate that the understanding of university education as being just another market category has become prevalent in England and many other Western countries. The purpose of higher education is increasingly presented in terms of its ‘exchange’ rather than its intrinsic ‘use’ value, positioning students as consumers and receivers of education (Naidoo and Williams, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017; Troschitz, 2018). While globally applicable, this article focuses on the English higher education setting where consumer relations are enforced through various legal and policy frameworks such as the Consumer Rights Act 2015 and the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA 2017). A number of national quality assurance tools (e.g. the

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National Student Survey, the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework) and mobile applications are used to measure and present student satisfaction and graduate outcomes. At the institutional level, universities have started to publicise consumer rights on their websites and to produce new forms of communication with students (e.g. 'You said, we did' webpages).

The article will start by exploring the ways in which student as consumer positioning has been produced in England. It will then move on to discuss the implications of consumerism on students' political engagement. Like Brooks (2017) I argue that student politics has been rarely the focus of scholarly research, and there is currently a limited understanding of what counts as political participation and what role universities play in politicising student populations. In capturing student politics, some have problematised the changing role of students' unions (e.g. Brooks, 2017; Brooks et al., 2015, 2016; Klemenčič, 2014; Nissen, 2019; Raaper, 2020a, 2020b), others have investigated student demonstrations with a particular example of student revolts in 2010/2011 (e.g. Cini and Guzmán-Concha, 2017; Hensby, 2017; Myers, 2017). Furthermore, some scholars argue that universities are ideal spaces within which to develop collective action (e.g. Altbach and Klemenčič, 2014; Hensby, 2017), others suggest that market forces in higher education have made it more difficult for students to 'learn how to think about, and do politics to effect change' (e.g. Nissen and Hayward, 2017: 141). This article aims to bring these different faces of student politics together to address the question: *what form does student politics take in a contemporary English higher education setting shaped by marketisation and consumerist positioning of students?*

In order to address this question, I will draw on the works of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Both Arendt and Foucault are thinkers who highlight 'the dark sides of the modern project' (Braun, 2007: 7) which in the context of this article can be seen as the marketised higher education sector with ever-increasing costs, pressures, and insecurities. By problematising the present state of the English higher education, the article will explore the extent to which students have been forced into a position of an 'animal laborant' (Arendt, 1958) whose primary function is to focus on immediate necessities in highly instrumentalised university environments. The works of Arendt will be used to critically examine the shift towards depoliticisation of contemporary student population where students' unions have been professionalised (Brooks et al., 2015, 2016; Klemenčič, 2011, 2014; Raaper, 2020a, 2020b) and students have become financially and emotionally affected by high tuition fees and student debt (Nissen, 2019).

I will then move on to investigate the ways in which a variety of diverse forms of political practices may emerge in a changed higher education landscape. From a Foucauldian (1982, 1984) perspective, student politics needs to be viewed in relation to discursive productions of certain types of political subjects (students). It is a political subjectivity that becomes a precondition for agency (Allen, 2002; Raaper, 2020a). As the market discourses construct students as consumers, it is expected that any political action by students takes place within and in response to such discourses. It is also likely that such discourses intersect with societal shifts that foster private interest and individuality (Han, 2015, 2017). By drawing on Foucault, it becomes possible to trace student politics in relation to consumer interest and identity construction/enactment.

While recent scholarly work portrays contemporary students as politically disengaged compared to their predecessors (e.g. Brooks, 2017; Williams, 2013), and media constructs them as ‘Snowflakes’, a fragile generation of students (e.g. see Roberts, 2017; Turner, 2018), the article encourages us to re-evaluate the concept of student politics and consider the more individualised forms it can take in contemporary universities and society more broadly.

Marketisation of the English higher education and the production of ‘student as consumer’

The higher education sector in England and many other Western countries has been shaped by market forces for some time now. McCaig (2018) outlines five policy stages through which the English higher education sector has been marketised between the 1980s and the present day. While the policy genealogy is not the focus of this article, it is important to acknowledge that the market forces acting on English universities have become increasingly complex: the discourses around efficiency, accountability, and human capital development in 1980s have been enriched with a myriad of additional influences related to diversity, competition, and risk management (McCaig, 2018). The latter has been particularly shaped by the HERA 2017.¹

Within this complex policy context, universities like other public sector organisations are pressured to become entrepreneurial to ensure their competitiveness in national and global higher education landscapes (Allen, 2011). While degree programmes are turned into commodities (Williams, 2013), universities themselves are constantly measured through various ‘quality assurance exercises’ which in the English context include but are not limited to the Research Excellence Framework (REF),² the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and the National Student Survey (NSS),³ creating a situation where institutions and individuals are ‘governed by numbers’ as vividly explained by Ball (2012: 34). Radice (2013) describes the contemporary governance model of education as ‘a combination of Stalinist hierarchical control and the so-called free market’ (p. 408) in which a shift from professional management to executive power, financial incentives and performance targets has taken place. It enforces universities and individuals ‘refashion’ themselves as the ‘entrepreneurs’ who are responsible for their own success and failure (Besley and Peters, 2007: 164). Han (2015) argues that as entrepreneurs, individuals need to view themselves as projects that constantly reinvent themselves to protect their self-interest and self-worth.

Students are positioned as consumers who are expected to make educational decisions based on various national and global league tables (Pritchard, 2005). Brooks (2018) and McCaig (2018) explain that the positioning of students as consumers is largely a result of policies introduced over the past 20 years, particularly the introduction of tuition fees and the fact that students need to cover the costs of their own education. The tuition fees of £1000 for home students in England were introduced by the Dearing Report in 1997 (NCIHE, 1997) which was followed by a significant increase to maximum £3000 by the Higher Education Act 2004. The reform permitted English universities to start charging variable fees of up to £3000 a year from the academic year of 2006/2007 (DfE, 2003).

This tuition fee limit was subsequently increased to £9000 based on the Browne Review recommendations and applied from 2012/2013 (DfBIS, 2011). Fees have been further raised in line with inflation up to a maximum of £9250 from 2018/2019 (UCAS, 2017). Considering the fact that tuition fee variation is largely absent from the sector as most English universities charge the maximum fee (McCaig, 2018), consumerism becomes a reactive position of professional accountability to external stakeholders – students – who increasingly pay for their education (Tomlinson, 2017). It also promotes an understanding of university education as a return on investment where the primary question is ‘how much money do you put in for how much you will get out as a potentially higher earner at the other end?’ (Brown, 2016). It could even be argued that consumerism and the associated idea of education being an investment is a way for the government to legitimise its tuition fee reforms over the past decades (Brooks, 2018).

The student as consumer is ideally seen as someone who, as a result of rational financial exchange, considers themselves to have purchased a particular product (a degree) and therefore expects access to certain quality services (staff/resources) (Williams, 2013). This repositioning of students is unsurprising as in the current economic context, university degrees move from being desirable to a necessity in many fields (Svensson and Wood, 2007). Students are expected to ‘shop’ for a university based on its value for money which includes various factors such as price, degrees offered, location, services provided, and reputation (Hoffman and Kretovics, 2004). By desiring return for their investment, they are seen to inform the market. In other words, consumerism becomes essential for making the market cycle work: there is an assumption that if students act as consumers, they will pressure universities to develop the highest quality courses and services (Naidoo and Williams, 2015).

In order to promote the market forces in higher education and to enforce the consumer identity among students, the UK universities have been made to comply with the consumer protection law. This is a legal framework that defines universities as providers and undergraduate students as consumers (CMA, 2015). The main aspects regulated under the law are information provision, terms and conditions, and complaints handling (CMA, 2015). Brooks (2018) argues that the Consumer Rights Act 2015 portrays a picture of student rights and satisfaction as the ultimate goal of university education, and students not being explicit about their concerns as the biggest risk to successful market relations. Sabri (2011) even argues that the idea of student satisfaction has ‘acquired the aura of a sacred utterance’ (p. 67) that is now at the central stage in most university policies and practices. It is therefore unsurprising that the NSS has become a major tool to enforce consumer rights in English higher education. The NSS results along with students’ continuation and employment data form the core metrics of the TEF exercise (Office for Students, 2019).

In addition to various legal frameworks that are enforcing an understanding of students as consumers, there are a variety of other initiatives that have been associated with consumerism. For example, the UK Government has been piloting a number of mobile applications that would enable future applicants to compare different university courses on the basis of graduate outcomes and value for money (Scott, 2018). The Department for Education launched a £125,000 competition in 2018 for technology companies ‘to develop new digital tools to help students pick the university course that is best for them’

(DfE, 2018). The government discourse around the initiative promotes an idea of higher education as an investment and a pathway to economic success as becomes evident from the statements below:

Going to university is one of the single biggest investments a person will make in their lifetime. So it is vital prospective students have all the right information in an easily accessible format to help them decide where to study. (DfE, 2018)

The new tools will help level the playing field between applicants, giving all students access to evidence on earnings and employment outcomes from different degrees. (DfE, 2018)

The former Universities Minister Chris Skidmore introduced two new apps ‘ThinkUni’ and ‘TheWayUp!’ in April 2019 and presented these as a great success story of higher education (Trendall, 2019). Many have critiqued the development of such applications and argued that no technological initiative can replace the expert guidance that schools need to provide to applicants on their educational and career choices (Greatrix, 2019).

Furthermore, the universities themselves have been producing various ‘You said, we did’-type websites which aim to demonstrate how the departments have acted on student (as consumer) feedback. These initiatives enable the universities to demonstrate that student voice is being taken seriously and mediate any potential tensions between the interests of universities and students (Raaper, 2020b). One of the most exemplary websites is from the University of York (n.d.) that responds to student feedback across a variety of categories: academic studies, support services, and colleges.

While the regulations and initiatives above are rather explicit in enforcing consumerism, it is important to note that this article does not suggest that students inevitably act as consumers, but it emphasises that the dominant national and institutional policy frameworks make it an influential discourse in English higher education.

Active consumers but passive political subjects? An Arendtian contribution

Universities not only provide (educational) experience to students or train future workers, but they have an impact on students’ values, identities, and sense of what it means to become the citizens of the world (Giroux, 2009). The role that marketised universities play in the development of students’ citizenship, political identity, and practices, however, is not always clear. The rest of this article explores the notion of student politics in increasingly marketised and consumerist environments. This is particularly important as neoliberalism – ‘a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms’ – tends to undermine and undo the very basic elements of democracy, including principles of justice and citizenship, democratic imaginaries, and associated vocabularies (Brown, 2015: 17).

From an Arendtian perspective, political action requires certain types of conditions, that is, a readiness to take initiative and set something completely new into motion while accepting that outcomes will always remain unpredictable (Arendt, 1958). Action takes place in relationships with others (Arendt, 1968), and is also irreversible, therefore

requiring significant courage and risk-taking (Arendt, 1970). Arendt (1958) distinguished in her book *The Human Condition* action from the two other core human activities: labour which is concerned with bodily processes and immediate necessities for self-preservation and consumption, and work that relates to fabrication of human world through various tools and economic outputs. In other words, action is the highest level of three activities through which we disclose ourselves to others. It is essential to consider the extent to which students are able to take risks and accept unpredictability within the highly competitive, insecure, and instrumental university settings. This is particularly important as political action takes place in a web of relationships where ‘every action touches off not only a reaction but a chain of reaction’ (Arendt, 1964: 180) and where the plurality of human agents is essential to initiate action but also to give it some meaning (Baehr, 2000; Thiele, 2009). This, however, can be difficult in a situation where students as consumers are produced by strict regulatory frameworks, market tools, and quality assurance exercises as outlined earlier in this article. I will therefore start by taking an Arendtian approach to political engagement in order to critically question opportunities for traditional forms of student politics that are interpersonal and public (Baehr, 2000), and where ‘acting in concert’ equates with power (Thiele, 2009).

A number of researchers (e.g. Altbach, 2007; Klemenčič, 2014; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013) argue that a shift has taken place in student politics from traditional forms of demonstration and revolt characteristic of 1960–1970s (or even 2010/2011) towards representational practices which relate to the role of students as consumers and their rights to have their interests safeguarded. More specifically, there is evidence to suggest that students’ unions as the centre of student politics have been in a process of change. These changes reflect in closer relationships between unions and senior university management, employing an increasing number of professional non-elected officers in students’ unions, and encouraging unions to manage/provide various social events and support facilities (Brooks et al., 2015, 2016; Klemenčič, 2014; Raaper, 2020a, 2020b). The former Universities Minister Chris Skidmore (2019) has even described students’ unions as ‘modern, professional organisations committed to voluntary work’, promoting an understanding of student politics as organisational and professional and which can be contained within the remits of students’ unions. Williams (2013) argues that contemporary student activism entails ‘the bureaucratic language of agenda items, assessment patterns, learning outcomes and programme monitoring’ (p. 110) where student politics is more likely to reflect in sitting on staff–student liaison committees than on picket lines. This strategic positioning of students’ unions as professional consultants allows universities to demonstrate that the ‘student voice’ is being taken seriously and student needs are accommodated (Brooks, 2017; Brooks et al., 2015; Klemenčič, 2011). One could argue that this is with an aim to promote excellent student as consumer satisfaction. However, this also means that the role of student collectives in mobilising students for wider political causes has been weakened and their practices have been more closely aligned with the interests of the university management (Nissen and Hayward, 2017). Wider changes in student population, for example, heterogeneity in terms of social and ethnic background, age, and mode of study, might further enforce the representative function of unions, especially as the diversity of students makes it difficult to develop a collective student identity for political activism (Klemenčič, 2014). However, it is also known that

representational practices have significant limitations. For example, it is questionable whether students' unions led by non-student chief executives are successful in representing student voice (Raaper, 2020a). Furthermore, evidence shows that students from minority backgrounds, those not living on campus or who work part-time are least likely to engage with UK students' unions (NUS, 2013), illustrating how unionism can often serve traditional student interests.

Arendt (1958) argues that action as collective act for the greater good has become difficult in a contemporary society⁴ where public and private interests have been blurred. It is evident that a marketised higher education sector plays a role in professionalising students' political engagement while emphasising the importance of protecting private and consumer interest. From an Arendtian perspective, this can be expected as the modern consumerist society is becoming a society of labour that is concerned with immediate necessity and consumption (Arendt, 1958). It is necessity that has invaded the political realm and turned our primary attention to immediate processes (Arendt, 1963). Within this context, she argues that the action has lost much of its former quality, turning individuals into instrumental 'animal laborans':

The last stage of the labouring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life has actually been submerged in the overall life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his/[her] individuality . . . (Arendt, 1958: 322)

It is now the 'animal laboran' who is the dominant representative of the human condition (Baehr, 2000). Thus, this article proposes that the notion of 'animal laboran' (Arendt, 1958) offers an opportunity to understand the student as consumer who in highly neoliberalised higher education settings is forced to prioritise immediate necessities, personal returns, and employment prospects. Rimmerman (2011) argues that compared to previous generations, contemporary youth is more focused on career goals; this is especially the case as a new kind of economy cannot assure young people with the type of material well-being their parents and grandparents had. The prosperity of the 1960s generated a feeling among students, particularly that of middle classes, that individual economic success can be achieved in a stable and expanding economy (Altbach, 1997). Within such settings, also the economic 'costs' of student activism were seen to be minor to their career prospects (Altbach, 1997). In contrast, the current UK students are expected to graduate with an average student loan of £50,000 to cover the costs of their university studies: twice as much debt compared to students a decade ago (Nissen, 2019). I recognise that the Browne Review increased the graduate income threshold from £15,000 to £21,000 a year for loan repayments, providing some safety net for students (DfBIS, 2011); however, finding any graduate job has become increasingly difficult. It is also expected that such high levels of debt do not only affect students' financial security but also their mental well-being and capacity for participating in university life and political communities (Nissen, 2019). One can assume that students' socio-economic background has started to play an increasingly important role in student politics, disadvantaging students with lesser financial resources.

In a context where risks associated with political action are significant, there can be no true public realm, but only private actions displayed in public (Arendt, 1958). Dolan (2005) explains this further by arguing that for Arendt, spontaneous human action is suppressed by 'the normalizing pressures of society once life – that is, sheer life – becomes the primary concern of politics' (p. 370). It could therefore be questioned whether most collective actions have become part of the necessary perpetuation of life (e.g. securing an employment in students' experience) rather than relating to any meaningful self-revelation through speech or action (Bowring, 2011). Arendt's approach to political action within the context of labouring society helps us understand the dominance of representative student politics, aiming to protect private interest in the highly competitive, insecure, and instrumental higher education settings. Such changes align with the prevailing policy discourses in England that continuously construct students as consumers. It could therefore be argued that the consumer status does not necessarily empower but rather restricts students in becoming politically engaged in collective action (Williams, 2013); it is the marketised higher education sector that reconstructs the meanings of and opportunities for student politics.

From 'acting in concert' (Arendt, 1958) to individualised forms of political practice – a Foucauldian perspective

It would be easy to argue that contemporary students and their unions have been depoliticised and the Arendtian theoretical perspective would allow us to do that. Arendt (1958, 1968, 1970) relies on rather normative definitions of political action, and for her (Arendt, 1958), action can only take place as long as there is a strong separation of public and private spheres. I argue that while the Arendtian view helps us understand the shift from traditional forms of demonstrations to representational student politics, it is likely to ignore some more diverse political practices that emerge from a context that prioritises private interest. By bringing in a Foucauldian theorisation of political subjectivity, the rest of this article traces how students can construct their political practice in response to dominant discourses.

Foucault emphasises the normalising character of power that shapes individuals in modern societies (Dolan, 2005; Franek, 2014). From a Foucauldian perspective, the individual is always 'subject to someone else by control and dependence [and tied to their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1982: 331). This also creates an opportunity for us to consider his approach to power and subjectivity as a much-needed extension to modern forms of student politics that are likely to be more than 'acting in concert' for just public/collective interests. Like Arendt, Foucault situates the individual within the network of social practices that characterise a culture at a particular time (Besley and Peters, 2007). Power for Foucault (1982), however, exists 'in the whole network of the social' (p. 345): all human relationships are underpinned by relationships of power (Foucault, 1983). Power can be 'at once visible and invisible, present and hidden, ubiquitous' (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977: 213) which also means that all private relations are charged with power and hence always political (Franek, 2014). In other words, if power is a manifestation of freedom for Arendt (which in consumerist societies

would reflect in the lack of power), for Foucault, it is always present and operates via mechanisms that shape and constitute individuals (Gordon, 2002).

Foucault helps us reframe the concept of power as something that forms the subject by ‘providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire’ (Butler, 1997: 2): power is what subjects depend on for their existence. It is important to question what opportunities exist for individual to manoeuvre within the power acting on them (Patrick, 2013). It is expected that power that controls subjects also carries an opportunity for the subject to resist these constraints (Tobias, 2005). By using a Foucauldian approach to power, I therefore suggest that student politics needs to be viewed in relation to the production of political subjectivities. This is particularly the case as ‘subjectivity is a precondition for agency’ (Allen, 2002: 135). Allen (2002) argues that one is unable to act without having the ability or capacity to deliberate, that is, without being a ‘thinking subject’ (p. 135). Once the connection between the action and the actor is established, it becomes unsurprising that the form of student politics changes over time: all subjects are in a constant process of being produced (Besley and Peters, 2007). Contemporary students need to navigate a changing field of student politics that is increasingly shaped by neoliberal policies and consumerist positioning of students (Wright and Raaper, 2019). Any political subjectivity (and action) is therefore constructed through discourse. It is the discourse – the ways in which subjects are spoken about and how they speak themselves – that becomes a space of functioning for the subjects (Foucault, 1972). As an example, I will outline two potential ways in which contemporary students may construct and enact their political subjectivity within the dominant discourses: first, in relation to private investment and consumer rights which provides an extension to representative politics discussed earlier, and second, as part of participating in social media-led campaigns. While often privately motivated, these forms of political action can have a positive effect on higher education and society more broadly. I recognise that these are just limited examples, and further research in the area would help to systematically map a variety of ways in which contemporary students enact their political agency.

First, as the dominant higher education discourse is increasingly shaped by consumer forces, Foucault would argue that any political action takes place within and/or in response to consumerism. It is especially the case as higher education policies have enforced an understanding of students as economically minded in protecting their private interest (Amsler, 2011). It is therefore likely that students start using their consumer rights to protect their interests. My prior research with students’ unions⁵ in England indicated that sabbatical officers⁶ often relied on consumer protection law to advance students’ educational experience (see Raaper, 2020a, 2020b). Students found themselves in situations where they had strong beliefs for higher education being transformative rather than economic, and where consumer rights became part of protecting the good practice in universities. I will provide an example from a student interviewee below:

Truly excellent teaching inspires students, builds critical thinking, and challenges their minds – an excellent teacher may inspire a student to work in the voluntary sector or a non-graduate, lower paying job. These kinds of socially beneficial outcomes are impossible to properly quantify . . . (Jennifer)

I find myself in bizarre situations in kind of university committee meetings, where I'll be using the logic of consumerism to argue for something good for students. So you know, I'll be saying, 'You're charging students £9000 a year, and you're also asking them to pay for their printing. What's that about?' (Jennifer)

The same study also indicated that students' unions often struggled to mobilise collective student resistance against higher education reforms (HERA 2017 in this project), and they heavily relied on collaboration with professional employees from the students' unions and the National Union of Students to make their voices heard (see Raaper, 2020a). It could therefore be expected that within the consumerist context, students create forms of alliances with professional actors to enact their agency and interests. This also demonstrates how contemporary student politics can be driven by economic and administrative necessity and what is possible in a given context (Pusey and Sealey-Huggins, 2013).

Similar changes in how students use their power for political means have been documented by Nissen (2019) who argues that while market forces make it difficult for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to engage with politics (as argued earlier in this article), these forces also alter student motivation for political engagement. Nissen (2019) suggests based on her recent research in New Zealand that when contemporary students engage with political practice, they tend to adopt practices that are uncontroversial and professional in their approach to improve rather than compromise their future employment. This is vividly illustrated by one of her research participants:

You know the thing where we're always told not to put stuff on Facebook that our potential employer might see? Yeah? It's like that. You just don't want them to see that you've been politically active. (Lily in Nissen, 2019: 67)

In other words, students may engage with societies and political organisations to enhance their employability, that is, for developing leadership and media communication skills, and useful networks (Dominguez, 2009). The private interest – consumer rights and employment prospects – can therefore shape contemporary students' political engagement. It can lead to collaboration with stakeholders and professional advisors, lobbying and making use of legal frameworks (Raaper, 2020a), demonstrating how neo-liberal tools can be used to manoeuvre within (or even exploit) the marketised higher education setting (Dominguez, 2009).

Furthermore, attention needs to be paid to contemporary forms of collective action and campaigning. While student movements of the sixties/seventies promoted university governance models that were both disruptive and recuperative of existing institutions (Ferguson, 2012), the more recent demonstrations have been targeted against the university financing (Williams, 2013). For example, the UK student demonstrations in 2010/2011 were formed against the government plans to treble the tuition fees from £3000 to £9000 per year, and it included national demonstrations and campus occupations across the country (Hensby, 2017). These demonstrations indicated that the attempts to rise tuition fees had become the most significant mobilising force for students (Altbach and Klemenčič, 2014; Klemenčič, 2014). One could argue that such examples may relate

to resisting the consumerist positioning of students, indicating the ‘practices of freedom’ in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1984). However, it is important to note that the recent HERA 2017 and the related tuition fee increase proposals did not result in any significant student demonstrations in England.

At the time of writing this article, however, there are major social protests taking place in Chile and Hong Kong, as well as global climate and race equality activism that all involve students. These demonstrations tend to be structured around single-issue campaigns from which the examples of ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ (originated in South Africa to decolonise universities), ‘Black Lives Matter’ (originated in the US against systemic racism), ‘Me Too’ (global movement against sexual harassment), or ‘Extinction Rebellion’ (originated in the UK with a focus on climate change) have all included significant involvement from students. While there is nothing new in students taking part in social movements (e.g. the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements in 1960s–1970s), a Foucauldian approach would allow us to consider the structure and motivation for student engagement in contemporary social movements. There is evidence to suggest that interest-based groups and student societies have become crucial for developing students’ political identity in contemporary higher education where students’ unions have been professionalised (Loader et al., 2015). It is also likely that students develop their networks beyond the university campuses by making use of social media (Lance Bennett and Segerberg, 2016; Vromen et al., 2016). Strong social media presence is characteristic of the campaigns outlined above, and such movements are often called the ‘hashtag activism’ (Yang, 2016). I would therefore argue that student networks for political engagement have grown and moved beyond the university campus, blurring boundaries between national and global movements as well as traditional campus-based student politics and civic engagement more broadly.

Furthermore, it may also be the case that student motivations for participating in such political groups and campaigns have changed in neoliberal times. By drawing on Foucauldian and Arendtian ideas, Han (2015, 2017) describes contemporary society as an achievement society where individuals as late-modern animal laborans and entrepreneurs of the self need to constantly reinvent and display their individuality. While serving important social causes, it is likely that contemporary single-issue-based campaigns with strong media and celebrity presence enable students (and young people more generally) to construct their identities and belonging. Above all, ‘neoliberalism forges an epistemic shift at the level of social subjectivity’: it transforms the way individuals relate to one another and their environments (Madra and Adaman, 2014). Political practice can then become about the self and social being rather than resisting the neoliberal economic practices that have caused these issues (Madra and Adaman, 2014).

It could therefore be argued that a Foucauldian approach to power and subjectification can offer ‘an analysis of the historically and culturally specific conditions of possibility for subjectivity and agency in modern, Western, industrialized societies’ (Allen, 2002: 136). The political action arising from a Foucauldian understanding may not meet the standards of Arendt in promoting political action free from private interests (Dolan, 2005), but it encourages us to consider the diverse forms that contemporary student politics may take in neoliberal environments that promote private interest, consumer rights, and entrepreneurial understandings of oneself. It allows us to understand that students’

political participation can be closely related to the construction of the self and studenthood within and in response to dominant neoliberal discourses.

Concluding remarks

While tracing contemporary forms of student politics in England, the article has demonstrated that the ‘walls of society’ (Butler, 1997: 74) – in this case the consumerist discourses – become a space of functioning for students. Neoliberal reforms and quality assurance tools in higher education aim to produce students as entrepreneurially minded human capital that seek to strengthen their competitive positioning and economic returns from their educational investments (Brown, 2015). This also means that within the neoliberal political imaginary it is increasingly difficult to act based on principles of moral autonomy, freedom, or equality (Brown, 2015). By drawing on Arendt (1958), this article has argued that the construction of student as consumer can result in ‘an animal laboran’ who is primarily concerned with oneself, one’s self-preservation and employability, and this can lead to certain types of ‘safe’ and personalised political practices. It is therefore unsurprising that traditional forms of student demonstration and revolt have become less likely in English university campuses where students’ unions have been professionalised and representational practices dominate. Marketisation of higher education alongside with the production of student as consumer has transformed the role of students’ unions and shifted student politics away from collective action to safeguarding an apolitical and consumerist student voice.

However, I do not want to suggest that student politics in England is necessarily in decline but encourage us to consider the ways in which new forms of individualised political practices can emerge as part and in response to dominant neoliberal discourses. A Foucauldian approach to political subjectivity has allowed us to place ‘the student as the political actor’ at the centre of student politics. While collective action – ‘acting in concert’ in Arendtian sense – might have become difficult in neoliberalised universities, it appears increasingly important to explore more subtle and individualised forms of political engagement that take place in campuses and society more broadly. These include safer practices related to student representation, participating in interest-based groups and social media-led campaigns.

As the article has demonstrated, it is the individualised forms of political engagement that are more likely to flourish in neoliberalised higher education settings. Within such contexts, it is fair to say that universities may have lost a sense of student community and belonging, where political action would take place in the form of a collective revolt and rebellion against structural and ethical wrongdoings: that is, as regards institutional practices or social justice. The infrastructure that would facilitate collective action – students’ unions, financial security, and mental well-being – have all been eroded in a context where everything, including ourselves, have been increasingly marketised and individualised. However, it is important to note that higher education may have also gained a multitude of new opportunities for students to express their identity and agency. In fact, neoliberal practices regarding consumer rights, the student experience, and graduate employability can initiate subtle forms of agency that allow students to stand up for their interests in situations that often cast them as cash cows, essential for financial viability

of the university sector. It may even be possible that these new forms of political engagement allow students to resist the consumerist positioning forced upon them through dominant societal discourses. Students as any other social group have adjusted to the neoliberal structural changes and are also able to exploit the consumer and social media tools available to them.

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Notes

1. The Act introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework that differentiates universities according to their teaching quality as Gold, Silver, and Bronze, and it encourages alternative higher education providers to enter the sector. The Act established a new regulatory body for higher education: The Office for Students.
2. The REF is a national exercise for assessing research quality in the UK universities.
3. Since 2005, most UK universities participate in the NSS which evaluates the experiences of final year undergraduate students and makes the results publicly available to inform the choices of future applicants.
4. This meant late 1950s and 1960s for Arendt, but I argue that such concerns are relevant to contemporary societies.
5. This project was funded by British Academy/Leverhulme grant (2016–2017) and explored how five students' unions from England engaged with the policy consultation leading to the HERA 2017. The project interviewed sabbatical officers who participated in the consultation.
6. Sabbatical officers are full-time student officers elected to students' unions by their members, mostly for 1 year but in some cases they can be re-elected for a second term.

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